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THE TRAGEDY OF VANNI CIVILIANS & TOTAL MILITARISATION

The Vanni has been the focus of war news from Sri Lanka ever since the **LTTE** importuned a large number of civilians in Jaffna into the Vanni at the end of 1995 and engineered a humanitarian crisis. As the result of effective lobbying no doubt, the **UN Secretary General, Mr. Boutros Ghali** expressed his concern about the situation there and the Vanni was thrust into international attention. The Government therefore was obliged to be seen as caring for the people there by providing food and medicine, while the **LTTE** tried all means to mould the civilians and civilian life to service their military needs. The Vanni became thus the last fortress of the Liberation Tigers. The Government on the other hand while verbally espousing concern for the civilians, has been subtly applying pressures to make life difficult for them, forcing scores of thousands to leave the Vanni and move into refugee camps. For example essentials for a farming community such as kerosene, rope, fertiliser and basic medicines for a malarial region and even panadol were either banned or always in short supply. The **LTTE** for its part always administered supplies sent by the Government keeping its military needs in view and profited from encouraging black-marketeering, artificially aggravating shortages.

On school-children and the young there was always heavy pressure to join the **LTTE**. The **LTTE's** military successes at Mullaitivu and Killinochchi and even halting the northward military advance had nothing in them for the civilians. Their children were turned into cheap cannon fodder in a war that was only bringing progressive ruin on the Tamil people. In the so-called cleared, liberated or Government controlled areas, an oppressive and debilitating

regime has been imposed on the Tamils on the pretext of security considerations. The Government has evaded world-wide censure only by not having these offending regulations on the statute book. They are imposed covertly, illegally and administratively. By so doing they are made all the more worse by being arbitrary, while making legal redress impractical for the ordinary man.

A graphic illustration of the fate of Vanni folk is the refugee camps in Vavuniya. Confined to these camps the inmates are allowed out for a few hours at a time after obtaining a pass. They cannot leave Vavuniya for another part of the country as the means of obtaining clearance are way beyond them. These once hardworking farmers are now idling in camps, living on meagre government handouts, with no proper schooling for their children, under conditions utterly ruinous to both community and individuals. This has now gone on for close upon three years. The camps being under government control with a police guard, the NGOs are not allowed to intervene directly. At Poonthottam camp with 8500 inmates for instance, the thatch was in tatters. A refugee said that he did not bathe for three days as he had been sitting in the rain. To the rest of the country and to the Tamils abroad vocally supporting the **LTTE**, these people have by now become 'out of sight, out of mind'.

Where the State is concerned, subjecting Tamils to such a regime has meant rampant corruption and a degradation of state functions and state machinery. It is a worrying comment on the Sri Lankan State that by its inability to address security concerns imaginatively and intelligently, keeping democratic ideals in view, it has been moving in the direction of conjuring up images of apartheid, an arbitrary form of it without legal sanction.

When the Vanni saga began in November 1995 with the UN Secretary General's expression of concern, it passed off as a false alarm after it became widely known that the **LTTE** had forced the people out of Jaffna. But today the alarm is a very real one and it should not be too late for the people when the world reacts. [\[Top\]](#)

Recent Developments

The Army halted its northward advance along the A9 trunk road and changed tactics after losing Killinochchi last September with heavy casualties to an **LTTE** onslaught using cannon and suicidal waves of fighters. The losses among the **LTTE** too were heavy at 700 or more killed, and were comparable with the Army's losses of considerably more than 1000. Both sides were in crisis and the **LTTE** launched an ambitious and somewhat heavy-handed recruitment drive. But its success was very limited.

Each of the two sides had lost between 2000 and 4000 killed during engagements in the Vanni. In deploying about 4 to 5 thousand cadre for the attack on Killinochchi, the **LTTE** thinned down its defences at Mankulam, which it had defended for several months, enabling the Army to capture it with ease. Such indications suggest that the present strength of the **LTTE** is below 10,000.

In the meantime from last December the Army adopted tactics where it had surprise on its side and has by now taken control of considerable territory on either side of the A9 between Vavuniya and Mankulam. By taking over the famed Roman Catholic shrine of Madhu which also functioned as a **UNHCR** supervised refugee camp and the surrounding agricultural region, a large segment of the Vanni population has been brought under Army control.

It is now estimated that about 125,000 civilians in the Vanni have come under Army control and 150,000 to 200,000 live under **LTTE** control. A number well above 50,000 have gone to India and a smaller number to Jaffna, over the last 3 years.

The recent operations have been conducted with hardly any loss of life. In villages people woke up to find themselves among the Army. Farming villages not under Army control too hope that the Army would move in, in a like manner. The immediate reasons for them are economic and the protection of children. Under Army control they hope to obtain Rs.1200 for a bushel of paddy instead of the Rs.500 the **LTTE** pays them. Apart from drastic reductions in prices of food and fuel, the cost of hiring a tractor to prepare an acre of land for sowing would drop from Rs.5000 to Rs.2500. Even rope for tying cattle has presently to be purchased in the black market for smuggled goods. Their present disposition is to do with tiredness from what both sides have very unreasonably imposed on them and has nothing to do with any love for the Government.

On the whole the civilians are relieved that the recent military operations passed without causing them much hurt or damage . But there is anxiety about future uncertainties. They were tired of the regime to which the **LTTE** had subjected them. Food rations to displaced families though inadequate, became regular after the Army take-over. Necessities such as batteries, milk food and medicines are available at normal cost. But for the refugees who were displaced from Killinochchi, Jaffna and other areas where military operations are taking place, it is going to be rising frustration with oppressive regimentation of a different kind.

These refugees are now without means, living on dry rations. Earlier many of them formed the mainstay of farm labour in the surrounding areas. For example Adampan was a flourishing agricultural area which had its harvest in mid-April. But the refugees from Madhu who used to work in those fields have this time been prevented from going there by the Army because it is still under **LTTE** control. Apart from them those who ran small shops, were involved in the fish trade, or used to fetch items for sale from the Government controlled area, are now out of work.

Out of sheer desperation many children and even teenage girls started queuing up with plates outside the Army camps at mealtimes. This gave room for rumours placing individuals at risk. When the Army took over Madhu in late March, the civilians had to register for dry rations. The Army made an announcement calling upon 'Maaveerar' (Great Heroes – **LTTE** men and women who died in action) families to register first. Taken in an unguarded moment, several of them went forward and were casually registered without anything being given away. Today the Army is said to be getting much information from persons who once had ties with the **LTTE**.[\[Top\]](#)

Deprivation, Hysteria and Social Disintegration

With large sections of the Vanni population coming under Army control, the **LTTE** took measures to retain some of the weaker sections under its control. Recruiting among them is easier and their presence ensured relief supplies. Many of the fisherfolk from Jaffna who were displaced to the Vanni during the 1995 Exodus had settled comfortably over the years at Vidatthalthivu and Pappamoddai on the Mannar mainland coast. Early this year the Army indicated its new strategy by a westward move from A9. Just before the second move towards Madhu in late March, the **LTTE** asked the refugee fisherfolk in Vidatthalthivu and

Pappamoddai to remove themselves northwards to Kalliady, Illuppaikkadavai, Vellankulam and further north.

The **LTTE** is thus squeezing them into a smaller area where conditions are difficult. Their earnings have dropped as they now face increased risk and harassment from naval patrols operating out of Karainagar. There is also a water problem in their congested new habitations in the villages mentioned above. Along with an inadequate supply, water has to be purchased at Rs.2/= for a pot. For a variety of reasons including a reduction of supply by the Government, the **LTTE** taking a share and disruption of administrative arrangements, the provision of dry rations to the displaced in several areas is very irregular. The people have heard the Government claiming over the radio that they are being given rations monthly. But in the Adampan/Parappankandal area for example, rations have been given only once since the beginning of this year.

Vast numbers of people in the area north of Illuppaikkadavai/Kalliady are suffering from repeated bouts of malaria. The proportion is more than 50% according to some observers. This condition can be overcome with proper medical care. For permanent relief from the commoner 'Vivax' variety, a commonly used treatment involves a supervised dosage of 'Chloroquin' and 'Premaquin' taken over a cycle of 8 weeks. These drugs too are in short supply. But these people, in addition to not having had proper nutrition for 9 years and having undergone displacement for 4 years, are made to endure malaria on top of their vastly reduced resistance. Almost everyone is physically very weak, having a skeletal appearance.

Amidst this deprivation there are shocking events, the like of which have not been heard of in this country for more than 150 years. These have followed the new displacement into the Illuppaikkadavai, Vellankulam areas. The parents of a new born babe quarrelled over the father's inability to find the money for purchasing milk food for the infant. Then they, together, killed the baby. In another incident the parents became so desperate without cash, that they poisoned themselves and the children to death.

There have been several cases, two of them well-established, where even in a generally impoverished environment, persons have been killed on lonely jungle tracks for their money. In one incident it was made to appear that the murdered person had hanged himself.

In Jeyapuram, close to Mulankavil, a displaced family originally from Jaffna arrived, desperately hungry and without money. They sought relief by digging up some wild yam, which they did not know was poisonous. The entire family perished.

Medical and educational services are in a state of breakdown. Even in a relatively better off area such as Adampan, there was only one clinic served by an RMP (Registered Medical Practitioner) who was trying to leave. Antibiotics are not available. There is no panadol in hospital, but it is available in the black-market for Rs.5 a tablet. Due to the absence of refrigeration facilities, infants have not been given their routine vaccines that are given in the rest of the country. It has been suggested that the **MOH** Mannar could arrange for monthly visits to the area with the vaccines carried in boxes of ice.

An incident which illustrates the attitudes of both the Army and the **LTTE** took place at Uyilankulam on 17th April. An **ICRC** convoy carrying food was crossing into the **LTTE** controlled area. Some policemen at the final checkpoint may have moved forward a little into no-man's land as the convoy passed. The **LTTE** opened fire and killed three of them.

Technicalities aside it was an ungracious gesture, considering that it was government food coming to them. The Army closed the entry point for about 12 days preventing all movement, demanding a guarantee that the **LTTE** will not do it again. It is understood that agreement was reached.

But recently the ground situation has changed and the **LTTE** has removed its permanent establishments in the area. Consequently it has become easier for civilians to cross over into the Army controlled area. The **LTTE** sentries withdraw north and come to their check point near Uyilankulam (i.e Kattankulam) only at 11.00 AM. Many civilians get to the Army point before then.[\[Top\]](#)

The Drive for Militarisation : The General Trend

Amidst this anarchy of crime, starvation, sickness and hopelessness the **LTTE** intensified its recruitment drive. There was full-day propaganda blaring through loudspeakers, street dramas and interruption of schools, playing on despondency and hopelessness. The Vanni become anything but the pride and glory of the Tamil people the **LTTE** said it would be when it attempted to evacuate wholesale the citizenry of Jaffna into the Vanni in November 1995. It used to be the boast of **LTTE** propaganda that areas under its control were virtually free of crime and discontent. Now in the Vanni the tragic, inhuman reality behind fascist rhetoric was being laid bare and the **LTTE** could not care less.

The **LTTE** had some success in Vidaththalthivu where in the prevailing confusion amidst evacuation and uncertainty, some joined its ranks out of frustration and desperation. But recruitment was not so successful in the Adampan/Parappankandal area because the people were not so despondent and the **LTTE** had evacuated everything of theirs some weeks ahead in anticipation of the Army moving in.

In a school having classes up to the O Level (Year 11) in Mulankavil, a teacher took his whole class of about 20 and joined the **LTTE**. The children were quickly removed away from the area so as to put off distraught parents.

During April the **LTTE** moved towards militarisation of the civilian population. All shop keepers, teachers and students were compelled to take compulsory training. The first few days involved physical exercises. In the Mannar mainland area the training was staggered. After Mulankavil and Puthukkudiyirppu, the training of shop keepers in the Adampan/Parappankandal area began towards the end of April. Training in this area was disrupted by the **LTTE** pulling out its structures.

The purpose of those who received the first stage of their training in the Mannar area appears to be that of posting them as sentries to inform the **LTTE** of fresh military advances. This would help the **LTTE** to direct its artillery. Rumours had been afloat that the compulsory training will be implemented at all levels to include village headmen and **AGAs**. These new orders were received with widespread resentment. For shop keepers who absented themselves, it meant closure of their shops as punishment. The **LTTE** told those who resisted verbally that they do not deserve to live in Tamil Eelam and should move out of the Vanni.

A fisheries society in Vidaththalthivu was told by the **LTTE** that they must all come for training. One member objected on grounds of personal conviction. The **LTTE** replied that he must then leave Tamil Eelam. The member said that the **LTTE** must then give him a letter

saying that he was forced to leave, if not, when he returns, he may like the expelled Muslims find it difficult to prove his claims. The situation then becoming unsettled due to Army movements, the **LTTE** left them alone for the present.

These moves to forcibly induct civilians made them apprehensive of coming under Army control. That the **LTTE** is anxious is clear. In his May Day speech in Mallavi, **Karikalan**, a senior leader, said that their Leader **Prabhakaran** would surely find a strategy to push the Army all the way south to Vavuniya. In Koddadichcholai in the East, a woman leader said that they are proud to observe May Day despite all the difficulties.

Signs of disillusionment within the **LTTE** have also been evident for some time. When **LTTE** cadre in the Vanni visit their homes during a break riding a motor cycle or driving a pick-up, it poses an attraction for the children to join up. But the older intimate friends in the village of the visiting cadre are often told, *“Don’t come into this organisation. What you see from outside is not the reality inside. We too are waiting for a chance to leave”*.

Because of attempts to induct school children into the **LTTE**’s military machine, parents are reluctant to send their children to school and school attendance had dropped to an estimated 20%.

Except for trying to move the refugees and their equipment out, the **LTTE**’s attentions in what was left to them of the Mannar District were half hearted, as the Army had started reconnaissance moves and were expected to bring the entire district under their control. Their more systematic and far-reaching attentions were in North Vanni – the Killinochchi and Mullaitivu areas.[\[Top\]](#)

North Vanni: Towards Total Militarisation

Although the Army was pushed back about 3 miles north from Killinochchi town last September, it took control of the Oddusuddan sector in December and is now within 14 miles of Mullaitivu town. This also entailed enormous displacement northward. For many it meant loss of livelihood and great difficulty in getting rations. Farmers who fled from their homes and fields in the area around Oddusuddan got into very desperate straits. One family for example sowed on rented land in Murippu and the crops were destroyed by floods. Closer to the Army controlled area, there is occasional shelling by the Army, such as in Tharmapuram, where several displaced schools are also situated. Those travelling out of the eastern sector have to pass through Vattakachchi, which is subject to shelling, to Murikandy and then to Uyilankulam near Mannar. They are advised not to travel alone in case of shell injury. A traveller met a seven year old girl pushing a bicycle and her father walking behind. He had no strength from having starved the previous day. For these once prosperous people, even a cup of plain tea has become a luxury. Although education is in disarray, some schools have done unexpectedly well due to displaced teachers from Jaffna, with one student in Mullaitivu scoring 4 As at the A Levels.

Amidst this anarchy and hardship which would only increase with time, the **LTTE** has launched an ambitious programme of militarisation. We describe below the first stage.[\[Top\]](#)

Schools

Anbu, the **LTTE** leader in charge of schools has ordered that all school children from year 9 (13 years) and above must as the first step undergo 3 weeks of physical training for 1 hour a day during school hours. This training is conducted by **LTTE** cadre or by young teachers who have been given a month's training by the **LTTE**. This will be followed by the second step which comprises 2 weeks of weapons training. First they would be given three types of guns – M 16, AK 47 & G 3 – along with grenades, would be taught how to dismantle and reassemble them, and how many bullets each gun could fire and their killing range. Next they would be trained how to take up positions, and move under cover from one position to another. The same training procedure has to be followed by the teachers parallelly, but after school hours. The lady teachers have been ordered to stitch T-shirts and slacks for purposes of training.

Having heard rumours about compulsory training, most parents kept their children away from school when schools reopened in April. But children continued to be sent to tutorials which are doing roaring business. The **LTTE** then approached tutorial staff and told them that should school absenteeism continue at this rate, the tutorials would be closed. The tutorial staff then told the students that they should not come there unless they are attending school. This put the parents and their children in a quandary. But the **LTTE**'s next move made it impossible to avoid training by staying away from school.[\[Top\]](#)

Compulsory Training for the People's Militia

Having begun with schools the **LTTE** drew up a scheme for a universal people's militia. The **LTTE** summoned a meeting of village headmen (**GSs**), a part of the government administration, who were to be the linchpins of the People's Militia. Each **GS** normally has about 150-300 families under him. The **GSs** were told that they would be responsible for compliance with the regulations, were given forms for each family, and were asked to return with the completed forms. Each head of the family has to fill in details about members, their age, sources and amount of income, cases of serious illness and so on. The people from 15 upwards were to be placed in 3 categories: 1st – 15 to 35 years, 2nd – 35 to 45 years & 3rd – 45 years and above.

The 1st and 2nd categories will be compulsorily trained in the village camps being organised. Those in the 3rd must go for training unless they can establish that they are seriously ill. Even if they are granted exemption, they must be present in the grounds while the others are training.

The people will be allowed to collect their relief rations sent by the Government only upon the **GS** certifying that the person underwent training. Thus those 15 and above who stay away from school will get caught to the Militia. There is again a discrepancy between those training in schools and those meant to be trained in the Militia. The former would also include 13-14 year olds. Local observers suggest that this group would be used as reserves. Orders have already been issued and Militia training is expected to commence during the course of May.[\[Top\]](#)

The Co-operatives

The co-ops are the bodies distributing government rations. As an allied move, the **LTTE** called up meetings of co-op administrators in different areas. They were told that the co-ops would from now function directly under **LTTE** overview. Rations, they added, should be given only to those coming with certification from the **GS**. At one meeting a co-op

administrator complained that because the **LTTE** divert part of the rations coming in for their own use, the co-ops run out of food to give those coming later in the line who are entitled. The **LTTE** spokesman responded that it is the fault of the co-ops. He added, *“If you tell us the number you serve, we will leave that amount and take the rest”*.

In the Mullaitivu area, co-op administrators protested that if they carried out the orders given by the **LTTE**, they would get into trouble with their superiors outside the Vanni. The **LTTE** spokesman replied, *“If you will not work as we want, you can handover everything to us and go”*.[\[Top\]](#)

The Leader

According to the new rules no one is allowed to leave the **LTTE** even after the completion of the mandatory 7 years. When this was introduced some months ago, those attaining the age of 35 were permitted to get married, after which they would remain in the organisation but perform non-combat duties. Those who had left the organisation but were in the Vanni were ordered to report back and deserters too were rounded up. The number so brought back is said to be about 2000. There is said to be no shortage of weapons. A section of those reinducted have been addressed by the Leader, **Mr.V.Prabhakaran**.

About the first week of May the Leader addressed a secret conference of all area leaders of the **Propaganda Wing**. He was hard on them for their low effectiveness. This he said had resulted in an appallingly low level of recruitment. To shame them, he delivered an emotional eulogy on the achievements of the **Military Wing**, with references to Killinochchi, Mullaitivu, the SL Army’s aborted northward advance on A9 and the achievements of suicide cadre. He gave them a time frame in which to take steps to boost recruitment.

The Leader further ordered them to conduct daily pocket meetings in every village. The lack of variety in propaganda material too came up for discussion. While the **LTTE** controlled Jaffna, in addition to the **Eelanatham** daily, the **Viduthalaippuligal** (Liberation Tigers) came out monthly. At present the **Eelanatham** continues to be published daily, but the second is irregular. The Leader asked them to regularise **Viduthalaippuligal**, and to put out additional leaflets.

Some of the measures mentioned above are being implemented and for the others orders have been given. Delays and modifications may be occasioned by constraints and public resentment. These are high handed and even fascist measures to impose on a helpless, starving, sickly, frightened and an almost hysterical population, brought to this point by their liberators by methodically blocking all saner alternatives. **Whatever the personal merits of the Leader, his charisma and endurance, his manner of struggle, as we have always said, is a mockery of liberation, and renders the Tamils objects of contempt. A heavier responsibility rests with those sections of the Tamil elite who flattered his vanity, without whose services this tragedy could not have been prolonged for so long.**

Take one example: The Leader has moved far towards using the food sent by the Sri Lankan Government for the displaced as wages for military service in warring against the same government, on the grounds that it is a genocidal government. He knows that human rights concern from around the world, and rightly so, would never allow the government, whatever its inclinations, to completely stop the food supply and starve the people. It is moreover a concern he never allowed his own people.

Most Tamils have doubts about his cause, those directly affected are often angry such as the victims of the Jaffna Exodus, and one day the survivors of the Vanni ordeal too will be angry. Yet the Tamils' historical experience of the Sri Lankan state and the regular humiliations they face, constantly reinforce a gut feeling of sympathy for his cause. It is of course most often the self-indulgent feeling of those at a safe distance from his organisation.

To understand this and move some way towards eradicating such gut feeling, we also need to confront and come to terms with attitudes and practices of the State and of the Southern elite, that contribute to it. [\[Top\]](#)

Civilians and the Security Regime

Earlier we referred to Tamils coming out of the Vanni who are confined to refugee camps in subhuman conditions. There are now about 14,000 such refugees in Vavuniya. This measure has no legal sanction. It is hard to make a list of such unlawful measures. Being unlawful, they are often individual and arbitrary innovations increasingly going out of control. To take a common sort of example, an old man had come out of the Vanni and was in Vavuniya trying to get a pass to travel to Trincomalee and join his daughter. Instead of going to a refugee camp where the procedure to come out is arduous, he submitted his application and boarded himself at the Hindu Youth Council for Rs.30 a day. 52 days later a Tamil police officer passing by saw him and inquired. The old man who had practically exhausted his money was living on bread and plain tea, asked the police officer to buy some for him.

After further inquiries, the officer checked and found that the old man's application had not even been faxed to the Trincomalee police to check on his daughter, and took steps to dispatch him there. In such matters Tamil civilians have no rights and the Police are not bound by any obligation to perform their self-imposed duty expeditiously. In the meantime, after 52 days, the old man had begun to starve.

In another instance a displaced elderly man on a wheel chair with an ailment wanted to go from Vavuniya to Colombo to consult a specialist. The Police wanted a letter from the **DMO**, Vavuniya, stating that consultation for the ailment was unobtainable in Vavuniya. It was in clear breach of a man's right to travel within his own country and to consult a doctor of his choice. Moreover this case and that above relate to persons who are clearly neither terrorists nor suicide bombers.

Getting permission to travel out of the North has been made a tedious process. In Mannar town which serves a large area, it means hanging about for several whole days at the pass office to see the police officer, even paying a bribe through an agent, and much paper work. Those who plan systems do not even know if they work, and make the public suffer instead. For example, for a person coming from the **LTTE** area to travel abroad or to Colombo, someone in the cleared (Army controlled) area has to stand guarantee. Someone in Mannar town for example has to surrender the local Army identity card and is given a temporary pass to remain in Mannar – not valid for travelling out of town. The person going abroad upon completing arrangements in Colombo has to send the guarantor by fax, copies of the visa and ticket. These are then produced to the Police who in turn ask the Colombo Airport by fax if the traveller has left. A lady who stood guarantee for an old lady going to India submitted the fax and went and hung around at the pass office to get back her Army identity card (which again has no legal recognition). At length she learnt that the Colombo Airport never responds to such queries from the local police.

The illegality of the whole range of practices, including compulsory registration in Colombo – in practice for Tamils only – and the need to carry the registration form around are underpinned by one singular fact : When an Inspector General of Police and the Attorney General were asked about registration and the need to carry the form in Colombo, they responded that these were not necessary. But it goes on. There is a particularly interesting absurdity. Sections of the security forces run rackets to smuggle persons from the North into Colombo in their vehicles for about Rs.20,000 per head. There have been cases of smuggled persons being apprehended by the Police in Colombo and then let off, because there are no legal grounds for prosecution. The most the Police can do is to detain the person on grounds of suspicion under the **PTA** and have the detention order extended from time to time by tame magistrates, knowing well that there is no case. The bulk of the Tamil detainees belong to this category. Being made to work in this moronic regime has a strong corrupting influence on security officials.

The system drives the policeman to ask not what law this person is in breach of, but rather how much he can pay? These practices have spawned a host of shady lawyers and agents, claiming to be able to bribe police officials and even magistrates. It brings about the degradation of the whole system of law, and of the State itself.

With the Government bereft of any political strategy to integrate the Tamils into the national fabric, these security regulations become more and more oppressive and arbitrary with every bomb that goes off in Colombo. They may be bearable for a few months. But continued indefinitely with no end in sight they become in effect a system of apartheid under the name of security, but without a legal framework. [\[Top\]](#)

Countering An Impending Tragedy

A very perilous situation now confronts us in the Vanni that could carry the tide of events in several unexpected directions. Like every fascist movement the **LTTE** will run the course of destroying itself. It is also characteristic of them that in their final inferno they try to take large numbers of their own people down with them.

Thanks to the Government's procrastination, the **UNP**'s opportunism and the volatility of the Southern political scene, a political solution to the ethnic problem once more looks distant. This created despondency in the ordinary Tamil mind, that if the **LTTE** is finished, they would be cheated once again. In many unseen ways the failure to have a political solution in place generates the dynamism to prolong the conflict. Had the Government's 'Peace Package' been a fact of life today, we would have faced a far less daunting situation in the Vanni. There would have been hope for the people, and hence more resistance to the **LTTE**'s impositions. Indeed there is resistance even today.

It is imperative that we face up to, in advance, the limitations of the Sri Lankan Forces. When operations were started in Jaffna during 1995, without any provocation from below the Air Force bombed a refugee concentration in Navalay killing 120 civilians in July and again in Nagar Kovil killing about 40 civilians in September. In the Vanni today, the **LTTE**, unlike in Jaffna in 1995, is doing everything possible to blur the distinction between combatants and non-combatants. A couple of aerial attacks like the ones above in Jaffna, and total mobilisation is bound to be seen as legitimate, with the people feeling that they were with their backs to the wall.

The experience in 1995 (as recorded in our [Special Report No 6, The Jaffna Exodus](#)) could give us ideas for the protection of civilians. There is a compelling case for enabling International NGOs to go into the **LTTE** controlled areas and organise safety zones for the civilians. If the Government Forces are enjoined to conduct themselves with restraint, it may well turn out that large numbers of **LTTE** cadre, many of whom are fighting for the lack of an alternative, would surrender when the opportunity arises.

Most of the displaced persons in the Vanni would have come out into the Government controlled area by now, if not for Government restrictions. Those who come out have been confined to camps in sub human conditions, while there is land in Vavuniya for them to live independently in temporary abodes. This is part of the mindset of a state machinery that has lent complicity to displacing Tamils and Muslims in Trincomalee urban limits, settling Sinhalese in their place and regularising the new occupation [see for example **Special Report No 8**]. The present plight of Tamil refugees also has much to do with state ideology rather than with legitimate security concerns.

Urgency demands that the immediate concern should be directed towards the civilians in the conflict zone. International agencies should be enabled to go into the area with such quantities of food and medicine as are deemed adequate. This will not save the **LTTE** which is in the process of destroying itself. But it would do much to protect the people and keep them away from the **LTTE**.

The political solution too can no longer be delayed. From the time of the **B-C pact** of 1957 it has been our experience that delay and defensive pleading eroded credibility and caused governments to renege on their commitments. The country itself has continued to remain an intellectual and economic backwater, dominated by paranoid and increasingly security conscious ruling interests, thus unable to realise its potential. Indeed a mental framework dependent on interests which cannot countenance the truth, leads inevitably to intellectual degradation. The 1980s and particularly the Southern insurgency, amply revealed that the Tamil militancy was to a considerable extent a pretext for the repressive laws and military machine these ruling interests called into existence. The country needs a new vision, not a repackaging of discredited notions. What the President has been saying in public, goes a considerable way in that direction.

A demand for federal status for, broadly speaking, the North-East, with far-reaching provisions for autonomy, would be irresistible in the modern world. There should be a concerted attempt by all concerned to bring this about. This alone would help the Tamils to find their feet, and for the State to dismantle this system of creeping apartheid that is increasingly enveloping the lives of Tamils. Eventually there should be a demilitarised North-East, with no more than a token presence of the national army.

As for the Tamil diaspora, it is these issues, and especially the protection of civilians in imminent danger, towards which they should direct their considerable lobbying powers. The Tigers and the destructive power they wielded were indeed for the most part the creation of an ideologically driven state that was pushing the Tamil people to live at the end of their nerves. It was for them a regime of violence with impunity – both mob violence and state violence. Lands they had farmed for several decades, and their own homes, often enough ceased to belong to them, having been snatched away overnight by gazette notifications hatched in secret.

But propping up the Tigers in their present form would only further the decimation of the Tamil community. And it can be done only at the expense of children of families in the Vanni, who are groping for survival amidst starvation, fear and disease. A struggle that ultimately leaves Tamil children and teenage girls holding empty plates, queuing outside Sri Lankan Army camps at mealtimes, is no liberation struggle.

The nature of the Tigers and where they would carry the Tamil people have been well understood for many years. But thanks to the opportunism of many, this has been obfuscated and the suffering of the Tamil people prolonged. The following was written by **Dr.Rajani Thiranagama**, the 10th anniversary of whose murder falls this year, in the context of the Indian Army's advance into Jaffna in October 1987 :

“.....They continued to lure the army, just to run away, letting the people face the result. It was cruelest of all when they told the people that another 500 to 1000 must die for them to have a viable international publicity campaign. This was not an isolated instance or statement of a group without contact with the leadership. It was pronounced at many places and in many forms. When the people were starving, wandering around like dogs for rice, the Tigers issued leaflets asking the people to boycott Indian distributed food.

When the children were dying with diseases, they threatened those who cared for them, ordering them not to issue Indian drugs. Did they offer alternatives, so that we could eat Tiger food and give our children Tiger drugs?”(The Broken Palmyra p 359).